

Theoretical and descriptive approaches to inflectional classes in Uralic and beyond

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The concept of inflectional classes (or, more specifically, conjugations and declensions) has been known since ancient times. Nevertheless, if we look at the linguistic tradition of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, there are relatively few works that not only identify inflectional classes in descriptions of particular languages but also attempt to examine the concept from a theoretical perspective, in particular by analysing and comparing different approaches to the identification of inflectional classes. The situation began to change in the second half of the 20th century, and since then work on the theoretical aspects of inflectional classification has grown steadily (see e.g. Zaliznjak 1967, 1977; Carstairs 1987, 1988; Carstairs-McCarthy 1994, 2002; Aronoff 1994; Stump 2001, 2015, 2016; Dressler et al. 2006; Blevins 2008, 2016; Corbett 2009; Ackerman & Malouf 2013, 2016; Stump & Finkel 2015; Sims & Parker 2016; Polivanova 2023).

Within morphology, the concept of an “inflectional class” is more complex than, for example, concepts associated with basic grammatical categories such as “case”, “number”, “tense”, “mood”, etc. First, inflectional classes presuppose the morphological expression of such categories, and this expression must vary in a non-trivial way that goes beyond purely phonologically conditioned allomorphy (although even this can be intricate). Second, a system of inflectional classes postulated for a given language depends to a considerable extent on the particular task faced by the researcher: descriptions intended for an academic grammar, a school textbook, or automatic synthesis or analysis of word forms will necessarily differ. Third, grouping lexemes into inflectional classes is based on the notion of “similarity”: “similar” lexemes are assigned to the same inflectional class and “dissimilar” lexemes to different classes. “Similarity” as such is too subjective to serve as a reliable criterion for classification, while attempts to formalise it, e.g. in terms of “inflectional identity”, immediately raise the question of arbitrarily taking certain criteria (e.g. identity of affixal exponence) as more important than others (e.g. differences in stem formation). Fourth, and in connection with the last point, the parameters underlying a system of inflectional classes may belong to different levels of linguistic structure: inflectional markers to morphology, stress and other prosodic properties to phonology, and stem alternations to morphophonology.

Inflectional class systems and their complexity differ widely across languages. For some languages (e.g. Turkish), the concept of an “inflectional class” is fully or almost irrelevant; for others (e.g. Burmeso, Donohue 2001), inflectional classes can be described in terms of transparent sets of affixal markers. However, there are many languages in which inflection cannot be adequately described by simply listing several sets of affixes. This is the case, in particular, in a number of Uralic languages, especially in the Saami, Finnic and Samoyedic branches, where inflection may involve complex interactions between affixal marking and various types of stem alternation. Similar issues concern many languages from various families, such as Indo-European (e.g. Baltic and Slavic, Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Icelandic), Nilotic (e.g. Maasai, Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk), or Otomanguean; see an example from Latvian below. Such languages require non-trivial

approaches to the description of inflectional systems. Our workshop will focus on these phenomena and on empirical and theoretical approaches to their analysis.

Latvian (Baltic, Nau 1998: 30–31)

verb	Infinitive	Present 1Sg, 1Pl	Past 1Sg, 1Pl
‘work’	<i>strādā-t</i>	<i>strādāj-u, strādāj-am</i>	<i>strādāj-u, strādāj-ām</i>
‘sing’	<i>dziedā-t</i>	<i>dzied-u, dzied-am</i>	<i>dziedāj-u, dziedāj-ām</i>
‘sit’	<i>sēdē-t</i>	<i>sēž-u, sēž-am</i>	<i>sēdēj-u, sēdēj-ām</i>
‘write’	<i>rakstī-t</i>	<i>rakst-u, rakst-ām</i>	<i>rakstīj-u, rakstīj-ām</i>
‘drive’	<i>brauk-t</i>	<i>brauc-u, brauc-am</i>	<i>brauc-u, brauc-ām</i>
‘break’	<i>lauz-t</i>	<i>lauž-u, lauž-am</i>	<i>lauz-u, lauž-ām</i>
‘decide’	<i>lem-t</i>	<i>lemj-u, lemj-am</i>	<i>lē-m-u, lēm-ām</i>
‘buy’	<i>pirk-t</i>	<i>pērk-u, pērk-am</i>	<i>pirk-u, pirk-ām</i>

When developing a system of inflectional classes for such languages, the researcher faces many issues that have to be resolved, starting from the ambiguous notion of “inflectional class” itself. For example, must inflectional classes be entirely unmotivated by phonological and/or semantic factors (see discussion in Gardani 2027)? Which forms should be selected as “principal parts” and how many of them are acceptable (Finkel & Stump 2007)? What is the minimum number of lexemes that may constitute an inflectional class, and, correspondingly, what proportion of a language’s lexicon can reasonably be treated as “exceptions”, i.e. words that remain outside the system of inflectional classes (see e.g. Arkadiev 2021 on Lithuanian verbs)?

The aim of our workshop is to bring together linguists working on different languages whose inflectional class systems can only be adequately described by going beyond distinct sets of affixal markers and taking into account such phenomena as stem alternations, stress and tone, order and position of exponents and potentially others. We focus particularly on Uralic languages, since these issues are highly relevant to many of them and have been discussed in numerous publications (see, for example, Viks 1977, 1980, 1994, 1995; Helimski 1994; Salminen 1997; Baermann 2014; Saar 2017; Rozhanskiy & Markus 2020). The questions to be addressed in individual presentations include, but are not restricted to, the following:

1. Should all parameters of inflection distinguishing between lexemes in a given language have equal weight in the analysis of its inflectional class system (see e.g. Parker & Sims 2020)? If not, on which grounds can we determine which parameters should be regarded as “primary” vs. “secondary” in constructing a layered system of inflectional classes?

2. What requirements should a system of inflectional classes meet, and what factors determine these requirements? In particular, can the requirement of “autonomy” of inflectional classes from either phonology or lexical semantics be upheld in practice?

3. What principles should guide the selection of principal parts, and what factors should determine the balance between the number of principal parts and the number of morpho(phono)logical rules in a system of inflectional classes?

4. What modern computational methods can be used to develop a system of inflectional classes for a language, and how can they be applied (e.g. Guzmán Naranjo 2019; Bonami & Beniamine 2021; Nikolaev et al. 2026)?

5. What tendencies can be observed in the diachronic development of inflectional class systems, and what triggers such changes (e.g. Gardani 2013, 2027)?

We welcome both theoretical and typological presentations, as well as studies of individual languages for which the issues outlined above are particularly relevant.

We invite 20-minute presentations, followed by 5 minutes of discussion. Preliminary abstracts (**100 words, in DOCX format**) should be sent to all the workshop organisers (see the addresses above) by **10 November 2027**.

Accepted abstracts will form part of the workshop proposal to be submitted on 20 November 2027.

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